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Introduction to Literature 131

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Prufrock

T.S. Elliot, a poet and literary critic believed that a poet wasn’t obligated to find new emotions but it is a poet’s responsibility to give real emotions meaning in poetry. Elliot also believed “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (Introduction-to-Literature.wikispaces.com). "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" by Elliot brought him literary fame. Despite the fact that Elliot, himself had not been married or involved with anyone at the time, depicts a middle aged man riddled with fear of loving or not loving a nameless woman. I believe that Elliot created Prufrock to express how he was feeling and to make him feel better about himself, almost in a therapeutic way.

Elliot did not want to create new emotions but to express emotions that exist in man already. “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*” is a great literary example of Elliot expressing real complex emotions of man. This poem expresses lust, fear, cowardice, rejection, suffering, anxiety, love, pity, self doubt and low self esteem in one poem. Elliot’s poem is told through Prufrock’s internal thoughts. Prufrock bounces from one emotion to the other like one tends to do when weighing difficult decisions in life.

Many have argued Prufrock is seeking a sexual encounter with a woman and others have argued he wants to marry this woman. I tend to believe Prufrock wants this woman’s hand in marriage. Lust is one of the first emotions Elliot displays in this poem. “Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table;/Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,/ The muttering retreats/ Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels/ And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells” (Elliot 1-7) signifies Prufrock feeling lust for this nameless woman. Lust is an age old emotion that is mentioned in the Bible. Elliot knew this frustration of lust and feeling dependent on the other sex. Considering Elliot once said "I am very dependent upon women (I mean female society)" and then added a complaint that he was still a [virgin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgin) at age twenty-six (Bush 1). Who best to write or elevate this frustration through writing than Elliot, himself. This may have been his way to escape the emotion and to escape his own personality trait of feeling inadequate in the matters of sexual encounters. Lust is not an emotion that can be created nor will any poet find a new emotion in place of lust. Prufrock seems humane and likeable because he is thinking what we have felt at one time or another in our own lives.

Prufrock also fears rejection from this woman. The fear of the unknown can be daunting for anyone. Elliot does a great job by describing or allowing us to feel Prufrock’s anguish over asking this woman an “overwhelming question”. We can understand Elliot’s comment “it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” in this moment. Prufrock’s personality does not really affect this piece. Cowardice or low self esteem may be one of Prufrock’s personality traits perhaps mirroring Elliot’s own traits. With this in mind, Elliot could be disguising his own faults making them Prufrock’s traits in which allowing Elliot to escape his own personality faults. The stream of consciousness style allows the reader to step into another person’s emotions rather than being told how to feel. We feel it for ourselves and it is more significant because we make our own assessments about our own emotions.

If Elliot’s intensions were to portray a man whose intensions were of a mere sexual encounter, then it seems eccentric for the hero to agonize over asking an “overwhelming question. The lines, “In the room the women come and go Talking of Michelangelo (the lady’s peers)” (Elliot 14). We may also interpret the “Time to turn back and descend the stair, /With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—/ [They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]/ My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—/ [They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"] /Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?/ In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse./ For I have known them all already, known them all;/ Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;/I know the voices dying with a dying fall/ Beneath the music from a farther room./ So how should I presume?”(Elliot 35-54) seems to indicate Prufrock imagining his wedding day with this lady.

“Time to turn back and descend the stair”, could be wedding day jitters which is normal for anyone to feel right before your life will change forever as he acknowledges by thinking “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?/ In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (Elliot 48-49). He checks himself in the mirror commenting on his balding head and mentions that he is his best attire, “My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—“(Elliot42-43) like a man would do before he goes down the isle. He also acknowledges his lonely existence saying he has “measur[ed] his life out in coffee spoons” and wants to end his lonely existence. Loneliness can drive mankind insane or cause fear within us. Once again Elliot has exploited a complex emotion that haunts all of us. We as the reader can understand Prufrock’s emotions because they are real to all of us. Everyone has experienced fear before a wedding day or fear of being lonely. It seems as if Prufrock has made up his mind in his day dream to marry the lady in line 52/53 “I know the voices dying down with a dying fall/Beneath the music from a farther room”(he is going down the isle).

Elliot may have been afraid of marriage or may have felt that he too may not have marital bliss. With this rational in mind is a perfect example of Elliot’s deliberate attempt to escape his true emotions by creating Prufrock with the same emotions as his own. This poem is not an escape of emotion but rather an understanding of human relationships and the pressure one goes through during monumental times. As Elliot said “[it is] only those who have personality and emotions [that] know[s] what it means to want to escape from these things” ( Intoduction-to-literature.wikispaces.com). Elliot seemed to use his writing for his own therapeutic release and to unite with his peers in his own way.

We could conclude that Elliot’s real fear would be ending up like Prufrock. Elliot’s implied meaning could be the fear of ending up like his anti-hero and releasing his fears and insecurities on to another person. Realistically we can not dump our personality traits on to another but we can create someone who is more pathetic than we are to make us feel better about ourselves. I think Prufrock makes Elliot feel better about himself. We tend feel comforted when we realize that our own fears are not of the ordinary and we are united by ordinary emotions. “*The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*” supports Elliot’s views on what a poet must do in order to make the poem a significant literary piece. The poem doesn’t have to be complicated or find new meaning but express what people are already feeling. Relate to the readers and let them escape their own rash of emotions or lives.

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I’m not sure if this is correct.